Task Force Diplomacy
A Cooperation Model for the Era of Great Power Competition

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About the Author

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Summary

In an era of increasing great power competition between China, the United States, and Russia, multilateral cooperation to solve global problems has become measurably more difficult. Slow multilateral responses are particularly problematic in the face of acute problems requiring a strong, immediate response, as the failure of a comprehensive response to the recent global COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated. The evolving “minilateral” structures can aid in a response but are not flexible or comprehensive enough to coordinate a global response to many problems. Ad hoc voluntary coalitions of willing and capable states and organizations—“Task Forces”—sprang up to lead the COVID-19 response. This “Task Force Diplomacy” model proved to be a viable supplement to existing multilateral, minilateral, and bilateral groupings.

Based on personal observations working on global cooperation aimed at addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a lifetime working on global and regional challenges, this is a first-cut effort to reflect on lessons learned that others can take as a starting point to move forward and embellish as we deal with mechanisms to address new fast-moving challenges in an evolving world characterized by great power competition. The intention is not to re-invent the international structure—indeed, the default response to global problems should remain multilateral, comprehensive cooperation—but rather to present a systemization of ways to deal with serious acute problems in which multilateral responses prove inadequate.
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One of the notable casualties of great power competition has been, somewhat axiomatically, great power cooperation. To the extent that cooperation among major powers is essential to true multilateral cooperation, this means that progress in multilateral frameworks has become more challenging. However, many international problems simply cannot be solved unilaterally, bilaterally, or “mini”-laterally (cooperation with a small number of states and organizations). In particular, complex and fast-moving international crises need a wide range of international actors working together and bringing diverse perspectives and resources to make constructive progress. If the old models of multilateralism are proving difficult to use in the era of great power competition, what is the alternative? Recently, the world has been inadvertently experimenting with a new model: “Task Force Diplomacy.”

Just as during a local crisis, entities come together that have relevant skills, interests, and resources—for example, in a hurricane, police, meteorologists, media, rescue teams, housing officials, businesses, civil society, etc., may join together in a task force to formulate a response—so too can states and institutions cooperate in responding to an international crisis. This new model of “Task Force Diplomacy” can respond quickly and spur cooperation even in an international environment characterized by intense great power competition.

Essentially, Task Force Diplomacy involves a temporary, voluntary coalition of the willing and able. The use of multilateral frameworks and established groupings and structures is obviously preferred, but in emergency situations, if those institutions are not responding adequately, interested states should establish groupings aimed at rapid constructive re-

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1 “Multilateral” cooperation here refers to cooperation among multiple states in a broad established grouping. It is not, for the purposes of this discussion, referring to the permanent professional staff of the headquarters of multilateral organizations. It includes cooperation within large regional organizations, as well as state cooperation in the global comprehensive international organizations. Anthony Dworkin and Richard Gowan, Rescuing Multilateralism (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).
response. Somewhat similar to the voluntary plurilateral approach used in trade agreements, participation in the task force is entirely driven by the will of each state or organization. The function is eminently practical, aimed at addressing a particular crisis and supplementing and supporting—not replacing—the established international structures and groupings that form the foundations of much of the postwar system. The recent covid-19 pandemic spurred the creation of several such temporary task force groupings, including the high-level covid-19 Pandemic Prioritized Global Action Plan for Enhanced Engagement (GAP).3 The lessons learned from this experience might be usefully applied to other novel acute issues or emergencies going forward.

The Difficulty of Multilateral Cooperation

Multilateral cooperation remains the gold standard for international cooperation. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres outlined in remarks to the April 2023 UN Security Council meeting, effective multilateralism can save lives and advance solutions to many of the broadest and trickiest international problems. Among other things, “effective multilateral responses are urgently needed to prevent and resolve conflicts, manage economic uncertainty, rescue the Sustainable Development Goals, and address challenges to the global norms against the use and possession of nuclear weapons.”4 Only multilateral institutions have the buy-in, the expertise, and the professional resources and personnel to collectively and sustainably address global-scale, long-term problems. In his plea for reform of multilateral institutions, Gordon Brown noted that “clubs, large or small, will not give the world the stability it needs.”5

At the same time, however, effective multilateralism becomes harder every day. In the same issue of Foreign Policy in which Brown issues his call for reform, Stefan Theil asks, “When was the last time the nations of the world reached a major accord?”6 Not since the World

2 William Alan Reinsch, “Plurilateral or Multilateral?,” csis, https://www.csis.org/analysis/plurilateral-or-multilateral.
Trade Organization’s Uruguay Round in 1994 has a truly globe-spanning multilateral agreement succeeded. The nonbinding Paris Agreement and the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals have proven difficult to advance. As former UN and World Bank official Mark Malloch-Brown noted, “I worry that the political gridlock, and the gridlock on security issues, is so great that the U.N. is going to hibernate on politics, security, and human rights in the coming years.” Academic studies have shown that “global cooperation is failing” and that fewer multilateral treaties are being signed and ratified, the implementation of existing treaties is poor, and states are increasingly rejecting oversight of treaty obligations and monitoring of compliance by multilateral organizations (MOs). Further, in attempting to measure whether multilateral organizations enable states to achieve goals that they could not have reached alone, “too few MOs currently make the grade.” A recent gis report noted, “With few exceptions, albeit important ones such as NATO, multilateral frameworks have not achieved their overambitious goals despite the continuous expansion of their bureaucratic structures.”

Not since the World Trade Organization’s Uruguay Round in 1994 has a truly globe-spanning multilateral agreement succeeded. The nonbinding Paris Agreement and the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals have proven difficult to advance.

At a more political level, many multilateral groupings that once regularly produced leaders’ statements now fall back on nonconsensus language, or language that is so deeply watered-down as to be meaningless. UN statements, climate negotiations, G20 statements, WHO and the Health Security negotiations, and APEC and ASEAN statements, to name a few, have all fallen victim to a failure of the great powers in the room to be able to align on a common language on meaningful global issues. If it is impossible to agree even on language, it is easy to see that on controversial issues, common action can be a bridge too far.

7 Theil, “The Alliances that Matter Now.”
9 Thomas Hale, David Held, and Kevin Young, Gridlock: Why Global Cooperation is Failing when We Need It Most (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013).
The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 through early 2020 was a particularly stark failure of multilateral response. The dynamics of great power competition quickly reared its head, with geopolitical rivalries outweighing multilateral cooperation and making the already-weak World Health Organization (WHO) even weaker and hamstrung in its immediate response. The UN and many other multilateral institutions, despite the committed efforts of experts and specialists, fared little better, with the political response hampered by both the pandemic itself and difficulty in promoting cooperation among great powers. For example, China, facing criticism in multilateral fora, quickly became defensive—when Australia pushed a proposal for an independent multilateral inquiry into the essential question of COVID-19’s origins early in the disease’s emergence, it found its barley exports to China suddenly became subject to an 80 percent tariff. COVID-19 proved the difficulty of a true multilateral response, given our current competitive international environment. The initial WHO response has been analyzed elsewhere, and was clearly slowed by reluctance within the multilateral organization to call out particularly powerful members (e.g., China). Once the vaccines rolled out, China, Russia, and others took great pains to operate bilaterally rather than through multilateral vaccine delivery mechanisms. China and Russia promulgated the phrase “vaccine diplomacy” and sought to undermine confidence in vaccines from other countries delivered through COVAX and UNICEF. Following a ministerial meeting after the outbreak of Omicron, China took to social media to criticize the U.S. effort to respond multilaterally.

13 Existing multilateral entities like UNICEF did heroic work. In this sense, some of the multilateral institutions succeeded despite the failure of state-level cooperation, but it would be a falsehood to say that states joined hands to address the crisis.
15 See, for example, Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, “Explaining the Failure of Global Health Governance During COVID-19,” International Affairs 98, no. 6 (November 2022): 2057–76, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iic231.
Is “Minilateralism” the Answer?

Given the difficulty of operating within a multilateral framework in the context of great power competition, what is the alternative? A simple abandonment of collective action seems unwise and dangerous. Again, returning to Gordon Brown,

We cannot reduce international policy to merely the sum of regional and bilateral relationships. What happens if there’s another global financial crisis? What happens if there’s again a worldwide contagion? What happens when droughts, floods, and fires reveal a global action that needs to be taken? What happens if, as U.S. President Ronald Reagan once mused to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, an asteroid is hurtling toward Earth?\(^1\)

Permanent “minilateral” groupings have recently gotten a lot of attention as a way to promote collective response to emerging threats. In these groupings, “small groups of countries are focusing on specific issues and shared interests—often voluntarily, rarely as a formal bloc—as a pragmatic alternative to cumbersome multilateralism and constricting alliances.”\(^1\) Examples include the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the “Quad,” made up of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), the Australia-United Kingdom-United States pact (AUUKUS), the India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States I2U2 grouping, and the emerging trilateral partnership among Japan, South Korea, and the United States.\(^2\) The G7 may be one of the original and most successful minilaterals—so much so that it has become as institutionalized as many multilateral organizations and cooperation groups. Other minilateral groups can be found around the world in clusters and clubs variously named trilaterals, quads, and quints. Even the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) began as a five-member anti-insurgency minilateral. Minilaterals are generally less

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1 Brown, “A New Multilateralism.”
formal than blocs or alliances but are still designed to be enduring and focused on strategic objectives.

These kinds of minilateral groupings have their place but also their limits. They are often suited to long-term problems best solved through a small grouping of states. Think of them best as “bilateralism ++.” They are not always suited to novel, fast-moving issues that are truly global and require a broad, diverse, and rapid response. Health crises provide an excellent example. Health diplomacy is often identified as an issue that requires extremely broad international collaboration. In 2014, then-U.S. President Obama argued, “Ebola is a global crisis that demands a global response.” Minilateral groups are rigid, with a set group of countries and a clear agenda. As the Quad and G7 COVID-19 responses showed, minilateral groups can be helpful but are not comprehensive or flexible enough to provide a coherent response outside their usual scope.

Task Force Diplomacy and COVID-19

A solution suggested by the COVID-19 response to the need for a broad-based, multi-state, multi-stakeholder response has proven to be a new model: “Task Force Diplomacy.” In this model, states and stakeholders join voluntarily, although certain entities take a quasi-leadership role to manage logistics and keep membership and tasks coherent. These ad hoc groupings are not new—during the push to pressure North Korea from 2017–19, for example, a group of states joined with UN agencies to share information on DPRK sanction evasion techniques and operations. However, it is worth looking more closely at the recent COVID-19 response for clear examples of the growing maturity of this cooperation format.

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The most important “task force” established was the Access to COVID Tools Accelerator (ACT-A)\(^2\) and its related vaccine-delivery pillar COVAX.\(^3\) ACT-A and COVAX formed as a group of countries, stakeholders, and international organizations with the goal of developing and delivering COVID-19 vaccines to countries and regions in need. In practice, they were amalgamations of the experts in already-established multilateral organizations (including the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the Vaccine Alliance Gavi, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the Pan American Health Organization, and others) and officials from specific countries and regional state-member organizations. Norway and South Africa took on extremely important guiding roles and were joined by a large number of countries hoping to combine resources to address the pandemic. Together, they aimed to accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines and to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world.

Another complementary “task force” effort evolved later in the pandemic and was aimed more at diplomatic coordination. The COVID-19 Pandemic Prioritized Global Action Plan for Enhanced Engagement (aka the “GAP”)\(^4\) started as an ambitious effort to complement the various COVID summits by convening foreign ministers to drive coordination and concrete actions to end the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. It arose in late 2021 as a new COVID-19 variant emerged—Omicron. Just as vaccine production was ramping up worldwide and the challenge shifted to getting the vaccines into arms, countries shocked by the variant reimposed travel restrictions, and aid and health organizations with limited resources worked to respond. In an era of great power competition, a rapid multilateral response was difficult—vaccine delivery and conditions for assistance had become an area of competition. U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken, who had helped coordinate the multi-nation diplomatic and assistance response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak, had a suggestion: bring together diplomatic partners to divide the problem and address the need for a coordinated response from states. This grouping would reinforce and support other bespoke groups, such as ACT-A/COVAX and the emerging COVID Vaccine Delivery Partnership, to coordinate activities, share information, and target resources. Like the other task force groupings, it would welcome the

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\(^{22}\) “What is the ACT-Accelerator,” World Health Organization, https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/about.


participation of experts from existing multilateral organizations. The tent was open to any states, regional groups, or organizations with something to contribute.

The GAP, with its diplomatic and political focus, deserves further examination for lessons learned in addressing future political crises. It was designed to be a time-limited effort to use high-level diplomacy to recognize health security as a national security challenge, bring attention to opportunities for collaboration, and help governments and other partners share information and solutions beyond the mandate of traditional multilateral health agencies. After a ministerial in the fall of 2021 and an emergency call on Omicron in December 2021, the GAP launched in February 2022 and included six lines of effort that addressed the key barriers to ending the acute phase of the pandemic. Foreign ministers engaged with pandemic recovery through the GAP and brought their expertise, a political lens, and their ability to help coordinate local and international responses. The strong participation by a diverse set of over 30 dedicated countries and regional organizations showed commitment and concrete results. Together, they addressed issues ranging from increasing vaccinations to improving medical supply chains to combatting harmful misinformation and disinformation. The GAP was an inclusive effort that prioritized gathering a geographically diverse set of perspectives. Every country had expertise to offer. Botswana and South Africa detected Omicron before any other country in the world and sounded the alarm. Bangladesh disseminated expertise related to its successful vaccination efforts. Japan invented new cold chain storage solutions to help increase vaccinations. Canada brought together experts to teach us why disinformation was spreading—the economic and disruptive motivations. Spain joined hands with WHO experts to address the needs of health workers. UNICEF joined hands with the United States, COVAX, and many other partners to address vaccine delivery in many of the hardest-to-reach regions.


Lessons Learned and Generalizations for the Future

The covid-19 “Task Force Diplomacy” groupings were not by any means perfect. A comprehensive study on ACT-A and COVAX has evaluated many of the elements that could have been done better. COVAX has been widely criticized for not fully succeeding in its global ambitions, but this is an unfair assessment. The COVAX Facility provided 79 percent of all vaccines delivered to low-income countries especially, providing 1 billion doses to 144 countries by the end of 2021, and playing an important role in ensuring doses could be delivered in-country. While deliveries to Advance Market Commitment (AMC) countries were small and sporadic initially, COVAX vaccine supplies played a major role in scaling up coverage in low-income countries. Likewise, the GAP countries provided essential political and practical support to the fight against COVID-19. Could the response have been better and more robust? Definitely. But amid a global crisis, states and non-state actors came together to cooperate and divide up the tasks at hand to make progress in tackling a global issue of great consequence, saving millions of lives and livelihoods.

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What, then, were some of the features of the “Task Force” model that promoted cooperation and action (see table 1).

The first and most obvious criterion is a clear, urgent, and concrete goal. The problem addressed must be serious enough to spur action and mobilize resources. As a temporary grouping to spur response, a Task Force is not the correct venue to address long-term challenges or principles and values—as important as those issues are, they are better suited to progress in more long-lasting structures. A Task Force should address a crisis or at least an acute problem that needs an immediate and robust response.

Following identification of the goal—which frankly should be fairly obvious in an acute situation—one or two countries or entities must take the lead. A Task Force has no permanent secretariat structure and thus needs organizing resources from existing states or entities.

**TABLE 1. Criteria for successful Task Force Diplomacy to respond to an acute international crisis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERION</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Structured around external, shared outcomes</td>
<td>The grouping needs a clear global goal shared by all members. The grouping should be based on joint goals, not strategic principles. The issue addressed needs to be acute (a “crisis”) and serious enough to motivate the members.</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
<td>One or two motivated countries or entities must assume a leadership and coordination role. Task Forces by their nature do not have permanent staff or a secretariat, and thus need existing actors to assume these roles.</td>
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<td>Self-selected membership</td>
<td>While the organizers may want to approach certain states and non-state actors with particular resources, the general membership should be voluntary and willing. Participants should be motivated and engaged, not expecting a benefit in return for participation. The architecture should be open, but the bar for entry should be high.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional and economic diversity</td>
<td>Geographic and economic diversity are essential to ensuring that all aspects of the problem are considered. Some lower-income countries may require support to participate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limit conflict among members</td>
<td>If a state or non-state actor appears to want to participate simply to make a political point, it must be acceptable to forgo their membership. The Task Force must ultimately consist of entities that can work together towards a common goal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Include multilateral organizations</td>
<td>It may be important to include multilateral actors, especially given their convening authority. The Task Force is not intended to undermine multilateral action, but to supplement it.</td>
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<td>Encourage stakeholder participation and feedback</td>
<td>Although civil society and the media may not have the resources to contribute, transparency and open discussion is the only way to ensure feedback and accountability.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divide the problem, and conquer it</td>
<td>While one or two entities may take a leadership role, broad collective ownership and participation are vital to exhibit shared effort. Governments and non-state entities can contribute in diverse ways. No one actor is expected to “do it all”; the problems should be divided into smaller pieces that each partner can appropriately tackle. Some may play leadership roles, while others share best practices or contribute to particular regions or technical areas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minister engagement</td>
<td>Political leadership is important to keep political attention on the effort. Ministers should meet regularly during the crisis, even if only in virtual form.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior official engagement</td>
<td>Developing regular engagement among a consistent group of empowered senior officials (SOs) is key to driving outcomes, locking in participation for ministerials, and enhancing engagement. Meetings of SOs can be structured but informal to encourage open dialogue to advance key policy issues, but also forge a new network that can continue to be leveraged after the Task Force ends. The relationships among the SOs help prevent bureaucracy from overwhelming progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statements</td>
<td>Regular written statements from the minister level promote action and advance policy goals by getting consensus in writing. Goals are clearly articulated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time-bound effort</td>
<td>To prevent the pressure to create a permanent bureaucracy or tackle new issues, the effort should be time limited. The effort should transfer to a more permanent entity when the pressure for action ebbs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, those leads must embark on the most challenging feature of a Task Force approach: determining membership. Membership will primarily be a “coalition of the willing and able.” States and entities should not be forced or coerced to join. States and entities with the will and resources to contribute to the response are the natural base for the partnership. That said, we discovered in the COVID response the need to think broadly about what resources a partner could contribute. Implementation of the COVID response required involvement by smaller and less-resourced recipient countries to ensure success. Thus, successful Task Force leaders should consider reaching out and supporting (including financial support) involvement by less-developed states and civil society organizations. While they may not have the scale of resources needed to drive the practical response, their perspective and experience will prove essential to avoiding mistakes.

States and entities with the will and resources to contribute to the response are the natural base for the partnership. That said, we discovered in the COVID response the need to think broadly about what resources a partner could contribute. Implementation of the COVID response required involvement by smaller and less-resourced recipient countries to ensure success.

Similarly, willingness alone may not prove sufficient for participation. A Task Force is a fast-moving, goal-driven process, and all partners must be able to work together and bring something to the table. It is not the place for optics, but action; practice, not politics. Organizers must carefully consider if a potential partner petitioning for membership will create conflict within the group. Finally, we found participation by officials and experts from international organizations critical for success. They established credibility and provided essential expertise.

The main principle for Task Force actions should be to divide and conquer the problem. Different state and non-governmental actors bring very different resources to a challenge. A Task Force coordinates the resources and perspectives but will not have the structure to respond itself. That is the role of the partners. In coordination with partners, the problem can be split into various smaller “lines of effort,” with assorted partners taking responsibility for response and implementation. To ensure political will, the Task Force needs regular high-level meetings, which can be virtual. And it requires a group of named senior officials at the working level to coordinate the practical response and actions. Throughout the COVID response, we found that issuing regular written statements provided a political impetus for
all parties to contribute substantively to the effort; these statements also helped clarify roles and responsibilities and leadership of specific lines of effort.

Finally, the Task Force must come to an end. Just as a domestic hurricane response task force eventually wraps up its work, the international crisis response task force needs to transition its work to established and enduring international structures as the acute situation resolves.

Future Tasks to Tackle

While the Task Force approach is not suitable for all problem sets, it has clear advantages in dealing with acute issues. Coordination and cooperation are easier because the grouping is small and the goals are shared. The Task Force model leverages all participants’ political will and resources without requiring complex bureaucracy and support structures. Finally, the smaller, focused group simplifies negotiations and takes advantage of the strength of diplomacy to spur and coordinate action.

Currently, one of the most significant drawbacks of the Task Force approach is the need to “recreate the wheel” each time an ad hoc grouping is needed. It may seem counterintuitive to plan for spontaneity, but in fact, this is the norm in most pre-crisis planning. Policymakers should consider establishing, at least internationally, a rigorous process for creating a Task Force. Criteria for leadership, establishment, and membership could be formalized and coordinated in advance with other major partners. Turning back to our domestic crisis response analogy, there is clear value in expecting a crisis in the future and planning the broad outlines of a response, regardless of what form or flavor that crisis takes.

A wide range of topics could benefit from a multi-stakeholder Task Force approach, even short of a global crisis on the scale of CoViD-19 or Gordan Brown’s looming asteroid. The current fentanyl crisis lends itself to a small group of state and non-state actors joining together to make a concerted cooperative push to address the issue. Some acute norm-setting needs, such as AI, cyber, and space, might best be addressed through a limited, focused grouping. Task Force diplomacy works best when the states involved feel equal pressure and are willing to cooperate to devote significant political and practical resources to resolving the issue at hand. The pandemic underscored that we must confront shared challenges together. It also showed that, in the era of great power competition, new models of cooperation might be necessary.